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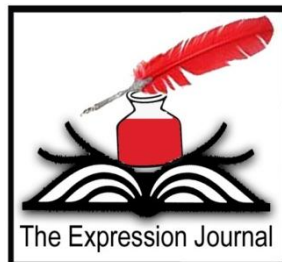


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## **NEGOTIATING HOLLOWNESS AND ALIENATION IN JAYANTA MAHAPATRA'S "DAWN AT PURI"**

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### **Abstract**

"Dawn at Puri" is a characteristic product of Jayanta Mahapatra, a renowned Indo-English poet who made his mark both at home and abroad. Mahapatra, the first Indian poet to receive the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for English poetry was a realist poet who was moved by the suffering, pain, poverty, hunger, hollowness and alienation of human life. He used to craft poetry out of disorder, out of Indian socio-political and cultural trends. In general sense, the word 'hollowness' means emptiness or falseness or lacking in substance or character; it is a state that contains nothing. Apart from this etymological meaning, in the context of modern life hollowness stands for a state of barrenness, shallowness or nothingness, it refers to the futility and desolate condition or the lack of sincerity or value. On the other hand, 'alienation' on the surface level refers to a detachment or separation of a person or person's affections from an object or position of former attachment. Alienation is the basic form of rootlessness or loss of identity. Alienation causes hollowness of life and many other emotional and psychological traumas. This research article aims to embark upon a venture in order to negotiate hollowness and alienation in reference to Jayanta Mahapatra's "Dawn at Puri".

### **Keywords**

Hollowness, Alienation, Negotiation, Isolation, History, Tradition.

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## NEGOTIATING HOLLOWNESS AND ALIENATION IN JAYANTA MAHAPATRA'S "DAWN AT PURI"

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Odisha is Mahapatra's native land. In the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra Odisha plays an important role. In M. K. Naik's words "Mahapatra's poetry is redolent of the Odisha scene and the Jagannath temple at Puri figures quite often in it. His most characteristic note is one of quiet but often ironic reflection mostly concerning love, sex and sensuality in the earlier poetry and the social and political scene in some of the later poems." (M. K. Naik: 217). The setting of the poem "Dawn at Puri" is the coastal area of Puri, an important religious place of Odisha. Puri, as we all know is considered a holy place, a sacred place, because the temple of God Jagannath is situated here. Though Puri has many religious connections and connotations but this place is particularly famous for the chariot festival of lord Jagannath, an annual ritual conducted for the glory of this deity. It is attended by a large number of pilgrimages across the nation. This festival is also celebrated in different parts of the country.

Jayanta Mahapatra's matured poem "Dawn at Puri" was published under the anthology entitled *Rain of Rites* in 1976, though, it is comparatively a small poem consists of just six stanzas of 3 lines each with no rhyming scheme but the poem contains so many layers uncovered by the poet. The poem superficially tries to show the place Puri as reverend. But it also tries to show that the place is forlorn also and the citizens of the place are suffering from destitution, hunger and joylessness of life. Now, Puri here functions as a miniature metaphor of India. In this poem we get the picture of entire India and a sense hollowness and alienation of the existing Indian traditional rituals. The poem is symbolic, metaphorical and imagist. Here the poet formulates the hollowness, the uselessness, the futility of the rites and rituals which are very common in Indian society vis-à-vis he evokes a good many points and issues like loss of identity, anonymity, death, disease, destitution, poverty, hunger and decadence.

Jayanta Mahapatra was a bilingual poet writing both in his mother tongue and English. In his own words his Odia and English poems are a sort of complimentary in nature. There are some certain Odia poems that never can be done in English, those native idiomatic words and phrases that common masses use in their daily life and conversations. These poems are easily understood by amateur readers rather than his English poems that are considered ambiguous by the critics. His upbringing, his roots play a big part in bringing over that Odia outlook into his English poetry. Though he was a Christian and was unable to accept the traditional Hindu culture around him but still Hindu blood had a presence in his body as his forefathers were Hindu and during his childhood he suffered from a sense of isolation and had always been a corner boy in his school.

The English poems he wrote in the beginning have more to do with the landscape, with his ancestors and with his tradition which is quite important to mould his poetic spirit. History and tradition play a great part in his poems in both languages. He had been very concern about his ancestors, history, traditions. His poems are more or less exploratory in nature. In Mahapatra's words you can't ignore history and write a poem, you can't ignore tradition and write a poem. So, history and tradition are the two arms that build the foundations of his poetry. These work as 'objective correlative' in his writing. Michel Foucault in his book *Diacritics*, writes about the importance of history and tradition as-

"The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogenous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individual and things. We do not live inside a void that could be coloured with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another." (Foucault: 23)

His explorative poems do not seem to have a proper beginning or end but it's from a middle that explores life in a flux almost which he sees there that also gives therefore a sense of nowhere that seems very interesting in one hand and on the other there is this tremendous racial or Oria consciousness of belonging to a certain people. And it's also wondering in that same context there is usage of shadows but it's a very real shadow to concretise the shadow for instance the shadow of hunger, death and decay. The poem "Hunger", accelerate both poverty and sexuality in a manner where the two are closely interlinked. It's a hungry fisherman with a hungry daughter who have resorted prostitution as their livelihood, while it's the sexual urge/hunger of the customer which takes him to the fisherman's shack. The fisherman tells him that 'she's just turned fifteen' to attract his attention towards his daughter. He invites him to "feel" his daughter. The two-fold hunger is evident here when the girl tries to please the customer by opening her 'wormy legs wide'.

Again, in the poem "Again One Day Walking by the River" the protagonist's feeling of decay, isolation and alienation is manifested when he says how the bodies of the lepers are partly eaten by their diseases. The lepers have a look of

helplessness and hollowness towards the world in their eyes and this dull expression in their eyes make the on-lookers, the poet indulge in all kinds of conjectures about them. The world is a mystery to them in the daylight as well as in the night. They are alien to the world, the society. Ashok Bery in his book chapter titled "Imagery and Imagination in the poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra" rightly says-

"As I have suggested, he returns over and over to themes of deprivation and decay; and his imagination also circles obsessively round a number of symbols and images such as rain, dawn, stone, the door, silence.<sup>8</sup> The tonal range and emotional palette are narrow, the dominant mood meditative, mournful, melancholy. His response to the suffering he notices everywhere is usually articulated with pathos rather than, say, irony, vehemence, anger, or satire." (RosinkaChoudhri: 302)

Mahapatra's poem "Dawn at Puri" can be read as a critique of Indian society and tradition. Here the poet talks about how in India, despite its crude poverty and hunger people are clinged to religion and culture, its hollow rituals and traditions and spending their last resource to complete these. The poem unearths the hollowness of Hindu rituals or Indian society and how the poet himself becomes a part of these meaningless of last wishes of life. The poem opens abruptly with the imagery of "Endless crow noises". The endless crowing of the numerous crows catches the attention of the poet in the early morning that sets the unpleasant spirit of death, decay and destitute. Mahapatra's line strides the key note of the chaotic condition all around. The place is marked by hunger, poverty and crime. It unveils bleak, dark, gloomy and depressing atmosphere of the place Puri as well as India. A half burnt dead body is lying on 'the holy' sand and the crow wants to eat it. The use of the word 'skull' is very symbolical that denotes death, destitute and poverty of India. In the second line the word 'holy' is ironically used. The country is empty and it's moving towards hunger and utter destitute of the people. So, we have a very sad gloomy tone in the beginning. The skull represents the hollowness of life and also the unavailability of death, its inevitable and obvious nature-

"Endless crow noises

A skull in the holy sand

Titles its empty country towards hunger." (line: 1- 3)

Here Jayanta Mahapatra is more intense to present the poverty-stricken condition of the place, its emptiness and isolation.

The second and third stanzas are also remarkable –making the scars, wound and desolation of the entire Indian society more prominent. The white-clad widowed women are waiting outside to enter the great temple. White is the symbol of purity, of calmness. Here the word 'widowed' denotes the patriarchal meaning- women who are made widow by our cultural norms. They have passed the centre or prime time of their lives and they have no aims or desires to cherish any long. Here the poet is trying to show without the centre i.e., husband the life has no significance for women. Indian culture is something like that where a women after the death of their husbands that was the centre of their life, they are



made widowed and need to spent the rest of their life like helpless creature. This plainly unveils the monopoly of Indian patriarchal society where husbands are taken as the centre of a family, and a woman's life's are moved around this centre called man.

"White-clad widowed women  
past the centres of their lives  
are waiting to enter the great Temple" (4-6)

The lines are highly suggestive speaking about the measurable plight of the Indian women who seldom attained economic independence, social security, personal identity without their husbands, the male members of the family.

In the third stanza, 'austere eyes' stands for the eyes that has no hope, desire, worldly pleasures, the eyes that are plain and pale with hopelessness. They have no freedom of their mind and body and are compared to the helpless creatures caught/trap in a net of patriarchal society. Crushed under the strict rituals made for the Indian widowed community, they have lost the right to enjoy their life anymore. While waiting outside the temple they are hopeful to get the blessings of God for the austere and peaceful life.

"Their austere eyes  
stare like those caught in a net  
hanging by the dawn's shining stands of faith" (7-9)

In the fourth stanza, we notice how society alienated the people with leprosy as it is a communicative disease spread by airborne droplets. Hence society has separated them from the root. Here the reference of the disease leprosy is again very symbolic. Leprosy occurs basically to people who live in utter poverty and distress. Though it is a curable disease but the poor folks have not that required money or capacity to visit a doctor. Rather society preferred to throw them away from their root and they are forced to live a beggar's life till their death. They have no particular place to live in, and no name to address by. Their loss of identity and alienation is reflected in the following line- "a mass of crouched faces without names". Mahapatra is highly added in creating word imagery "the frail early light" makes the very condition of the leprous inability to move freely and their frail condition acutely prominent. There is much intellectual strain in Mahapatra's poetry. But his genius is never oblivious of its traditional root. They are the impoverished people, the beggars or the nameless folks of lower class who are not allowed to enter the temple, "the ruined, leprous shells leaning against one another" in front of the Mandir in the hope that pilgrims will come and give them some money. Here, again, the poet is trying to deal with the theme of poverty, starvation and destitution.

The fifth and penultimate stanzas substantiate how the poet himself becomes a part of these hollow traditional beliefs. At the break of dawn as the poet looks at the single funeral pyre burning a sudden thought occurs to him that of his mother's last wish. His mother, who is getting old, has said that her desire in life is that after her death she should be cremated here i.e., on the holy sandy sea-beach where all pious people wish to be cremated in Puri as it is known as the 'swargadwar', gate of heaven or the midway to heaven. So it is the wish of most

people belonging to Orissa to be cremated on the holy sandy beach there after their deaths and that's why the beach at Puri has a long stretch of a cremation ground. He dawns all of a sudden. The symbol of dawn in this is also of realization.

The mystery has always fascinated him. Our Indian lives are not strait or linear in the way western lives proceed or go on. So, we live in a sort of a mysterious atmosphere. We live in a more or less in a psycho, we do not know when a straight line that we are take becomes a circle and when a circle becomes a straight line and that is what is there at the root of Indian living, Indian existence. These things are always there for as if you come to the Western living, Western behaviour, attitudes are purely linear. They don't think about what happens after deaths but we Indians do how we would be cremated, where our souls would be placed. The Western people immediately forget about the departure of a people in their family but we don't. We go on, our *sradhas* are there, we have so many customs that we are adhered to.

In his book *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, Bruce King has aptly argued "Mahapatra's poems often record a distance between himself and the customs of his surroundings. There are the sounds of temple bells, the prayers of priests, the funeral pyres, the uncomplaining acceptance of the past, representing a possible reality, or a mentality, of which he is not part. The listening and waiting are, however, a result of consciousness, the rational mind which is aware of its individualization and difference. The poems keep returning to the desire to overcome such alienation through passive attention, in the hope that some renewal will occur." (Bruce King: 2001)

Ruins, death, destitute fascinate Mahapatra. His poetry makes us painfully, disturbingly aware of rootlessness and hollowness of our tradition. His poetry is deeply rooted in his lived experiences and out of this personal experience he crafts poetry. He lives in a thousand years old small city called Cuttack and the sort of intimacy he got in living his native land he never found in anywhere else. Then Cuttack was asqualid, poverty-stricken ordinary village like many others in India-

"This was Orissa then: the poverty of huts and hovels sunk into the red earth of squalid side lanes, and the bare needs of our people. The wild growth of vegetation around us, and the misery and disease. The beggars apparently everywhere: the crippled and the blind; miserable wretches with their fearful whines and epileptic fits; young girls and boys with eyes gouged out by the scourge of pox; and the ever-present lepers... All this was something, I realized then, from which there could be no escape. For there seemed to be no remedy for these people; they had to suffer their torn, maimed lives in apathetic silence." (Mark Zdrozny:138)

Perhaps poetry is what Mahapatra can speak about and about his own life endlessly because he believes life and poetry are interlinked and poetry can only come from life/realiry. In one of his interviews, he confessed clearly that he never wanted to be a poet. The thought of writing poetry has never come into his mind when he was young and he started writing poetry at the age of 38, when generally poets done their major works and when Mahapatra himself thought he has already finished with his own life. But how did this happen and what compels him to write

poetry? Even Mahapatra has no answer to this urge. The art of writing a poem, of bringing a particular feeling to form and fusing the words for the poem seem to be all. He started writing poetry in the manner he experienced living, filling the wrong, the lie, the nastiness and the injustice he perceived around him. He wrote his beginning poems in English then he went on in Oria, his mother tongue. In both these languages both in English and Oria he wrote about what he saw, what he felt, what he perceived and nothing else.

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